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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000407

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TAGS: PREL MOPS MASS PHUM FAID AF AE

SUBJECT: UAE QUIET ABOUT TROOP PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN
AFTER BBC COVERAGE

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Although the BBC, likely with UAEG approval, broadcast the presence of UAE forces in Afghanistan on a March 28 report, no signs of the story have appeared in local media. Internet comment, often quite scathing, is being generated by the BBC report and reflects some angst that the presence was hidden from the UAE public. Until notice from the UAEG that its public posture on the deployment has changed, Post recommends the USG refer inquiries on the story to the UAEG. End summary.

Putting the troops on camera

¶2. (C) BBC viewers and listeners, including some members of the country team in Abu Dhabi, were treated to a surprisingly frank presentation of the UAE troop presence in Afghanistan on Friday, March 28. The UAE presence has been kept at the confidential (or higher) level since its outset almost five

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years ago at the request of the UAEG. We have heard mention of the deployment by UAE officials in multilateral military meetings (SOCENT Symposium in Abu Dhabi, spring 2007), but even then details were vague and far from the public eye. In fact, the upshot of the BBC's opening line was acknowledgment of a troop presence that even the UAE public knew nothing about. The coverage kept the focus on humanitarian operations in a "hearts and minds" campaign, highlighting the value of a Muslim army in the coalition, yet noted the periodic need to engage the enemy militarily.

¶3. (C) While the UAEG no doubt authorized the coverage, the journalist may have gone somewhat farther than the UAEG anticipated. Even as the BBC footage circulates on the Internet, Post has seen no acknowledgment of the UAE presence, or the BBC story, in the local media. Neither the English nor Arabic dailies have made any mention of the breaking story. The silence suggests possible UAEG discomfort with the extent of the coverage.

No local press, but some venting on the Internet

¶4. (SBU) With the cat out of the bag over the BBC, however, the blogosphere is giving the troops some unwelcome attention. Some writers cite the wisdom of the UAE leadership in sending Muslim troops to assist in a humanitarian operation, others decry the poor judgment of a decision to send UAE troops into an infidel operation. While we cannot definitively ascertain the nationality of contributors to a

specific Internet forum, the following comments were derived from sites frequented by UAE nationals (informal translations from Arabic).

--- "You (UAE forces) are dogs. I hope al-Qaeda and the Taliban behead you."
--- Reference to the "disgraceful presence" of the UAE in Afghanistan.
--- "May Allah curse them" for their "betrayal."
--- Why do they not keep peace in Sudan and Somalia instead?
--- A reference to getting "permission from Bush" for deployments. Another reference to troops sent to "obey their masters in Washington."
--- Humanitarian missions should be carried out by the Red Crescent Society, not men in uniform.
--- Why did the government keep this mission a secret until the BBC exposed it?

¶ 15. (C) Some comments appear politically motivated and all are self-selecting voices who seek to provoke as much as to contribute to a rational dialogue. That said, if the Internet is the only forum in which a UAE citizen can comment on a government decision of this magnitude, it is not surprising that those who choose to do so will take a generally controversial stance. It would also appear that the underlying anger of contributors has as much to do with the UAEG having kept the deployment a secret as it does with the deployment itself.

Deployment still being handled discreetly

¶ 16. (C) Post has commended the UAEG on the openness this coverage indicates, but has yet to receive clarification as to the UAEG intent in granting permission to the BBC (one

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must assume the coverage was authorized given the direct interviews conducted with willing UAE soldiers) or any new guidance on how to address the deployment in public. Until such time as guidance is received, Post recommends keeping details of the deployment confidential and referring inquiries to the UAEG if pressed.

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